



Reducing Skills Shortages through effective guidance and training of older workers

Background Paper for an Ideas-Building Event at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 5th – 6th March 2007

Welcome

I'm delighted to welcome you to this confidential ideas-building event. As you'll know from your invitation, the purpose of this event is to explore what we feel can be done to establish a national infrastructure and support system that will encourage and assist older workers into job vacancies that are hard to fill due to skill shortages.

Naturally this won't suit all older workers, no more than it would suit all young people. The key issue we want to tackle is whether, amongst older workers, there is a much needed group that could fill skill shortages but are being overlooked. Why? It could be for a number of reasons: lack of confidence, ambition or knowledge, lack of flexibility or imagination on the part of employers, myths about older people and what employers are looking for, brokerage, training or a combination of all of these and more.

At the event, we want to tackle these issues by drawing on our collective expertise and experience and, most importantly, by being willing to consider propositions **from different viewpoints**.

I'm sure you're all familiar with events where participants act as strong persuasive advocates for a particular group, organisation or cause. That's not what Open Agenda events are about. We actively encourage participants to view issues from different angles. At this event, the viewpoints we will **all** need to consider will be those of the Government and employers, as well as that of older workers, if we're going to work up some robust propositions that are likely to attract their buy in and support.

Advocates only represent one viewpoint. Their aim is to persuade others round to their way of thinking by the power of their arguments. While this is a valued role, it is not helpful for ideas-building. It can often result in people becoming locked in battles of views, where no one is prepared to shift in their thinking, or give up an inch of ground!

This is why I hope everyone joining the event will be as open minded as possible, and accept that we are engaging in areas of debate in which **no one is certain of all the answers or the best way ahead**. This can sound risky to some – and feel even riskier as we go through the process – but the great pay-off is that it really does give us the opportunity to break new ground in our thinking.

St. George's House

The reason that we are holding this event at St. George's House is that the aim of the House is to create an atmosphere of trust in which well-informed people can bring fresh thinking to key issues that will have impact on our future. It is **NOT** the sort of place where delegates with badges listen to speeches. It **IS** a place where free spirits can try out new ideas without fearing the consequences.

We are conscious that we're welcoming some to St. George's House for the first time, which is why we'd like to forewarn those booked you that when you arrive, you will find that you are not offered a key to your room. This is quite intentional, and is because the Dean, Canons and Warden welcome you to the House, as their home.

We hope that you'll feel that you can enter into the spirit of the place as a safe and welcoming environment, and that the experience will be both creative and enjoyable.

When you arrive, you will find your name badge on a table in the Patricia Hotung Room, on the ground floor of St. George's House. We are just putting first names on badges to make it easier to see each other's names, and also to spare us what can be the 'creeping death' of introductions.

We are very keen to create an informal atmosphere during our time together, and we have found that making a point of using each other's names – instead of saying "*I agree or disagree with the person over there, who's name I can't remember!*" really does help people to relax and spark creative discussion. Please don't think we're being over familiar!

Agenda and Contact Numbers

Our agenda for the 2 days is outlined below and overleaf. If anyone needs to contact you urgently whilst you're attending the event, the 'phone number for St. George's House is **01753 848848** and the fax number is **01753 848849**.

Monday, 5th March	from 11.30 am	Arrival at St. George's House
	12.15 pm	Light buffet lunch in St. George's House
	1.30 pm prompt	<p>Opening Session in the Vicars' Hall</p> <p>Agree goals and ground rules. Begin by considering specific skill shortages that older workers could fill with guidance and training. From the outset, we want to probe a little deeper than just the headlines of sector areas. We want to get a feel for what sort of jobs are proving hard to fill because of a shortage of skills.</p> <p>We then want to ask: 'what is the benefit to employers and the State to focus resources on older people (say 50 years +) to fill skill shortage jobs rather than other sources of labour?'</p>
	3.00 pm	Short break
	3.10 pm	<p>Second Session Explore if some sort of 'universal' information, advice, guidance and training service for all older people (both employed and workless) is needed or if we should focus more narrowly on those workers that can meet skill shortages. A key issue arising from this discussion will be the degree of State investment there should be for any system that we feel needs to be put in place</p> <p>At this stage, we want to sharpen up what we are proposing that is in addition or different to the services already in place.</p>
	4.55 pm	Tea
	5.05 pm	Sung Evensong in the Chapel for those who wish to attend

Tuesday, 6th March	6.00 pm prompt	<p>Evening Session</p> <p>During this session we want to work up in details how we can graft additional support options for older people to the infrastructure in place in ways that will help specifically to meet skill shortages. At this point we want to be fairly pragmatic about our propositions. In particular, they need to highlight:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who we envisage paying for what, and the potential cost efficiency savings to the Exchequer, and • How they can be absorbed into current provision, especially by those working in the 'front line' • How these options might form part of wider services for older workers.
	7.40 pm	Break for pre-dinner drinks in the sitting room
	8.05 pm	Dinner – we encourage people to dress as informally as they wish for dinner
	9.45 pm	Private Tour of St. George's Chapel, led by Andrew Carter, Warden of St. George's House
	8.00 am	Communion in the Chapel, for any who wish to attend
	8.28 am!	Breakfast in the Dining Room – timed just before 8.30am to coincide with the end of Communion
	9.15 am prompt	<p>Morning Session in the Vicars' Hall, with short breaks during the morning</p> <p>During the morning session we want to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • test out our propositions – are they robust enough to win inter-Departmental and national agencies' support? • agree our work plan to take these ideas forward and make them happen: key messages and actions
	12.30 pm	Lunch

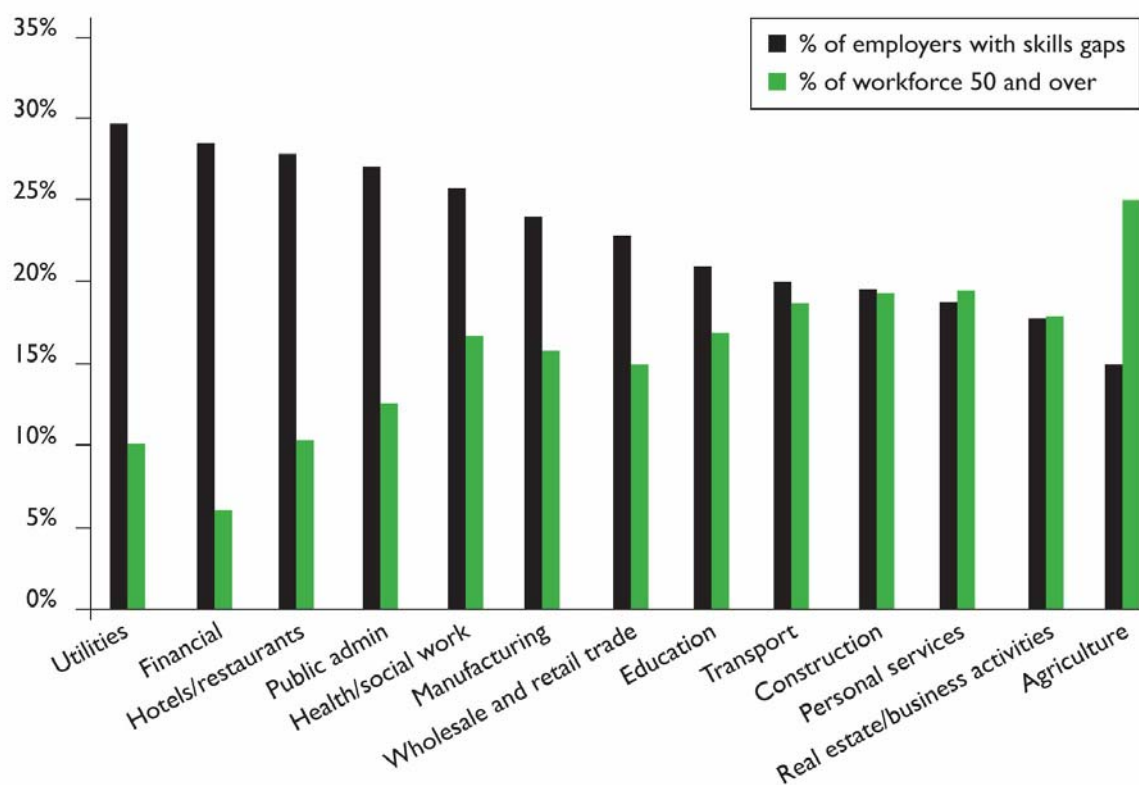
Our approach to this event

Important key notes of our approach to these events are informality and confidentiality. So we dispense with the usual 'round robin' of introductions and format of opening presentations.

However good, opening speeches encourage the 'us and them' habit, with one or two people being expected to produce all the answers, and the rest of us lobbing in questions and indulging in the sport of picking holes in their arguments! We want to begin this event as we mean to continue – with a fast flowing informal discussion, in which we **all** feel that we have a responsibility to put forward ideas and, in doing so, **take risks** in breaking new ground.

So, following a brief welcome and confirmation of the ground rules for the event and how we will manage our time over the next 24 hours, we want to move straight into discussions by sharing what we mean by skill shortages.

Below is a chart produced in 2003 that gives an idea of the relationship between the skills gaps reported then and the age of the workforce in different sectors.



Taking the first five sectors on this chart, there are a low number of older people working in the sectors and, at the same time, they are experiencing skill shortages. We want to dig below the surface and understand why. Once we have a shared understanding of what the reasons maybe for the relatively low employment of people aged 50+ in these sectors, we then want to explore whether there are real advantages for employers and the State to increase employment opportunities for people who fall into this age group.

We are not looking for a consensus of view from our discussions: but an understanding of the issues and potential benefits from different viewpoints.

From this base, we can begin to explore what we need to put in place if we feel that there is much to be gained by assisting older workers to meet skill gaps. Alternatively, we can consider whether our preliminary discussions have persuaded us to view skills gaps as irrelevant to the issue of older workers accessing paid or unpaid work.

What we want to avoid is any false consensus. Before we begin to work through the type of services that will enable older workers to move freely in the labour market, we need to agree that there are a number of reasons why this is important. The services need to be fit for purpose: not only for the purpose of the older person, but also that of employers and, where public finance is invested, that of the State.

Before evening, we will review how far our discussions have taken us and how they will inform our focus for the evening session. At this stage, the plan is to explore in detail the key elements that a service for older people should comprise, and how this service differs from the infrastructure that can be accessed by all ages that is in place already.

These elements may include:

- Information, advice, guidance for individuals and employers
- Brokerage for individuals and employers
- Training
- Employment

On Tuesday morning, our aim will be to consider the detailed ideas that have emerged from our discussions and whether they add up to a coherent and persuasive vision.

Before ending, we will put our ideas through some reality checks, and firm up the key messages we take from this event and want to share more widely.

We determine the agenda

One of the key principles of Open Agenda events is that we determine the agenda as we go, in order to get the most from our time together. This means that, at any stage of our discussions, we can change the structure of a session, if we feel that it will help us achieve stronger outputs from the event. I say this, with one important proviso.

We find that groups go away far more satisfied with what we have accomplished by the end of an event, if we start off with a commitment to achieving **as much clarity as possible** in our discussions, and really push ourselves in **breaking new ground** and **moving ideas forward**.

Working in idea-generating groups

As an important part of the ideas-building process, we will break into '**idea-generating**' groups during the event to tackle key questions raised through our discussions.

The purpose of these groups is to focus on sharpening up the issues and developing ideas that we want to pick up and run with. Please use your time in groups to sound out your ideas and do **not** be tempted into trying to develop a group view.

We use these groups because it gives everyone an opportunity to think through different points of view and have their say, when this would be impossible as one large group because of time constraints. As a result, a number of different – even opposing – ideas can emerge from small group discussions.

This is what we're after: ideas and not a group view. For those who haven't been in on a Windsor event before, it's worth saying that it really helps us to leave the groups behind, if you make a point of **not** sitting with members of your group afterwards, and agree to outlaw the phrases "we think" or "my group thought that".

"We think" makes it difficult for group members to change their minds without feeling disloyal to their group. Also, "we think" has more authority than "I think" and, completely unintentionally, can make it less easy for others to challenge or discard ideas.

We will also break into groups for longer periods of time to '**build ideas**'. In this instance, it is more likely (but not certain!) that there will be agreement amongst members of the group. What we ask is that when you come to share your thinking with the rest of us, you **just give us the idea**. Please don't feel you need to share the journey your group has travelled in developing this idea! If we are not clear about its rationale, we can always ask questions.

Going with the flow

We need to manage our time together carefully as one large group, if we're going to develop the momentum we need to move our discussions forward.

Developing ideas needs careful listening. Let's try and stick to the rule that when someone comes in on the discussion, they **follow on** from what the person before them has said, before moving on and starting a fresh train of thought. Please also resist the temptation of making more than one point. As soon as someone says "*I'd just like to make two or three points at this stage in our discussions*" the ideas stop flowing, as we are drawn to recap on what's gone before.

Of course, when we're together as one large group we want **as many people as possible to participate**: brainstorming is not a spectator event. So I'll try and ensure that the more confident, natural talkers amongst us don't squeeze others out.

Meeting everyone's expectations

We are bound to arrive at Windsor with very different views about the relationship between older workers and skills shortages. This is why we should give ourselves some time early on to work through **as a group** the issues we feel are most important for us to explore during our time together.

Developing ideas is always a messy process, especially during the opening stages. It can be frustrating for those who like to focus quickly on what they feel is **the** key issue that needs to be tackled, and want to get on with sorting it out. The difficulty with this approach is that one person's key issue is another's back burner!

So, I would like to ask that we all try to be as relaxed as possible in the opening session, and let as many as possible have their say, so that we can build up a head of steam **as a group** in identifying the issues we want to explore in greater depth.

Reducing Skill Shortages through effective guidance and training of older workers
Background Paper for an Ideas-Building Event at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 5th – 6th March 2007

Overleaf are the Conventions of St. George's House for consultations and ideas building events held here at Windsor Castle. At the beginning of the event, I will ask you if you are happy to adopt them as ground rules for our discussions.

I very much hope that you'll be open to giving them a go, as experience has shown that their application can make an enormous difference to both the quality of debate and the ideas that emerge.

Krysia Hudek, Open Agenda

25th February 2007

St. George's House Conventions

1. *Please be open to changing your mind*

We hope that during your time at the House you will see yourself as a “free spirit”, open to the possibility that the opinions you hold most dearly, on the topic under discussion, might actually be wrong. Once we each take that step, we find that it is much easier to persuade others to question their own assumptions, as well.

2. *Please do not attribute remarks to individuals after the event*

At all House events, we ask groups to agree at the outset that comments made in plenary or small group sessions will not be attributed to individuals afterwards. We have a firm convention that people should not be quoted without their permission, and commend this to you most strongly.

3. *Please take risks with ideas*

The most successful Consultations at the House have been those where individuals feel sufficiently relaxed, and supported by others, to be able to take risks with ideas. This requires a high degree of trust among a group, and we hope that from the outset you will seek to build that trust.

4. *Please try and avoid any false consensus*

We hope that if you find a consensus emerging in your discussions, you will check to ensure that it is soundly based. It can sometimes be very difficult for individuals to resist the pressure to agree with their peers, and we hope that healthy debate will not be stifled by a false consensus.

5. *Please use “plain English”*

At just about every event, one of the biggest struggles is with the weight of technical language that some speakers tend to use, and others leave unchallenged for fear of displaying ignorance. We ask **everyone** joining a Consultation at the House to avoid using acronyms, and to be ready to intervene in debate to ask colleagues to use “plain English”.

Andrew Carter

Warden of St. George's House